

CHODAVARAM HERONRY

By S. Ashok Kumar & S. Balaram

Fleeting glimpses of vast stretches of luscious green carpets of paddy fields hemmed by Palmyra palm trees and interspersed by towering cocoanut groves feasted our eyes while cruising along NH No. 7 on 5th September 2003 in West Godavari district. With the monsoon clouds floating overhead, the weather was pleasant. After covering a distance of 66 kms. Chodavaram village name board greeted us. It is a typical coastal village consisting of a single main road with scattered habitations on either side, bylanes with tiled houses beyond which are the agricultural lands dotted with Palmyra trees.

Chodavaram village (31°E and 17°N) has two panchayats, East and West separated by a puntha (cart track) with a population of 4000 and 1000 respectively. East Chodavaram boasts of an elementary and high school. The habitat in this panchayat consists of fallow agricultural lands fringed with rows of *Borassus flabellifer* while in West village, apart from Palmyra there is dense growth of Mesquite trees (*Prosopis juliflora*) and a few Tamarind and Neem trees. Both the habitats are under private ownership.

We had met Mr. Prasad Rao, the village Panchayat Secretary, elders of the village including the ex-village munsiff, Smt. Katyayani, Ex-Sarpanch of E. Chodavaram and Uppada Somaraju and made enquiries about the heronry. According to them, the Openbilled Storks start arriving in small groups soon after the first monsoon showers. After pairing, wooing and mating, they start nest building activity during July which goes on in August by late-comers. Clutches are laid during August-September and the birds immediately start incubating. At the time of our visit nest building was complete and some birds were actually incubating while others were on foraging missions. Some of the chicks had already hatched and they are looked after till they are able to fly. By Deepavali and sometimes by December end, the birds leave the habitat, to return only during the next breeding season. The villagers told us that the birds make a sojourn to Kolleru Lake and the neighbouring paddy fields for foraging.

The spatial distribution of the nests depends on the leaf growth of the Palmyra palms. Where there is less foliage, nests are precariously close to each other. In fairly dense foliage, nests are 1 to 1/2 feet apart. A single nest is built in the crown as it can accommodate only one pair. The nests in Palmyra palms are at a height of 30 to 35 feet, while those in Mesquite trees are 20 to 24 feet above the ground. The nesting vegetation preferred by the birds are Palmyra

palms and Mesquite trees though there is a sprinkling of Tamarind, Neem and Coconut trees in the vicinity.

The residents near the habitat told us that sometimes intraspecific competition for sites is noticed, especially in trees in which leaves have been harvested. The owners of the trees do not harvest all the leaves for the purpose of thatching their huts and leave four or five leaves in each tree.

We had counted a total of 98 nests in ten Palmyra and three Mesquite trees in both the panchayats. The birds in the vicinity of Smt. Katyayani's residence in Ayanum Nageswararao street were seen landing on the Neem tree, twisting and breaking the green Neem twigs, ferrying them to their nests and placing them around the inner nest. It is very likely that the Neem leaves are used to prevent or kill the bacteria in the nests. Some birds were seen preening their throats and wings, adjusting sticks in the nest while some were incubating. One pair was seen bending, stretching their necks together and slightly opening their mandibles and whispering.

In West Chodavaram we noticed Crows predating on the eggs in unguarded nests. While the crows were pecking at the eggs, a pair of Openbilled Storks in the adjacent nest appeared totally unconcerned. There was also no agnostic behaviour though the flying crows were almost brushing their wings.

Earlier around 2000 birds were reported to be breeding in this habitat. However, at present there are around 750 birds. Elders of the village informed us that the main reason for their decline is the cutting of the Palmyra trees which were in abundance. Consequently the birds have shifted to Puniashetram village (31°E and 17°N) near Rajahmundry in East Godavari District which is about 50 km. as the crow flies. They further informed us that a poacher by name Chanti used to poach the birds by catapult and sell them. Once he was caught red-handed and banned from the village. Due to the efforts of Alluru Krishna Rao, Ex-MLA of Ungutur anyone poaching is caught and fined heavily and this tradition still continues. The villagers do not feel that the birds are causing nuisance by their droppings. Residents like Uppada Somaraju have given up harvesting of the leaves for the sake of the birds. Senior citizens of the village claim that their village is the birthplace of '*Nattagottu konga*', implying that since times immemorial, the birds have been breeding in the village. Secure environment, adequate availability of nesting material and food appear to be the determining factors for the birds to still prefer this habitat. Being close to human habitation, this heronry is an 'associated' type of heronry.

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